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ABSTRACT

Like so many slogans, "Whole Language" is a dangerous term because its meaning varies with each educator. Whole Language is not a method of teaching, nor is it a program; it is a philosophy or viewpoint. Nine major characteristics of a Whole Language approach as culled from a variety of sources, with most agreed upon by a majority of authors, are: (1) fun in reading; (2) oral language as a bridge to print; (3) risk taking; (4) use of rich literature; (5) developmental versus preconceived sequence; (6) integrating the language arts; (7) reading whole texts versus excerpts; (8) meaningful use of language versus isolated drill; and (9) reading as a natural act. While bits and pieces of method associated with the philosophy have been supported by research, little research has been done on the total. Educators are obviously in a state of flux. Educators must make every effort to ensure that the effective elements are here to stay, especially: the encouragement to modify curriculum to fit kids instead of trying to fit kids into preconceived molds; the emphasis on children doing a lot more real reading and writing; and the practice of children doing both reading and writing as communicative acts rather than devoting the majority of time to skill exercises. If children are to become independent readers, the skills they do learn need to be used in real reading. Educators need to recognize that both skill and interest are essential. (Thirty-four references are attached.) (MG)

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Whole Language:

Looking for Balance Among Dichotomies

Presents an overview of nine major principles from the professional literature that have been associated with the philosophy of Whole Language. Places the viewpoint within a historical framework and examines each element in terms of cited opinion and research. Concludes with the suggested need for balance between the frequently expressed dichotomies of skill instruction and interest development.

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Whole Language: Looking for Balance Among Dichotomies

The educational pendulum is notorious as educators act and react with enthusiasm and dismay to extremes that are often nothing more than false dichotomies. In the process of reaction, we too often lose the valuable new ideas as a result of extreme views and claims. Hence, the purpose of this article is to examine the elements of Whole Language in the hope of presenting some clarification that will protect its values from its deadliest enemies--its extremist promoters.

Even a cursory glance at the past several decades leaves the neck in pain from the repeated action and reaction of the educational pendulum. Rebellion against the lockstep use of basals in the late 1950s brought out a rebirth of freedom to read under the labels "Language Experience" and "Individualized Reading." The former espoused learning to read through use of children's own dictated language; the latter, through the self-selection and use of library books.

Reaction came by the 1970s, when the decline in skill instruction was replaced with a vengeance by management systems and diagnostic/prescriptive reading instruction. Real reading was replaced with isolated drill, as the reading act was fragmented into hundreds of individual skills, each of which was to be diagnosed, taught, and evaluated.

Once again came reaction against the extreme of a skill orientation as educators reached back to the earlier, more open approaches. Promoted further, from the 1970s to the present by the whole word or "sight" opponents to phonics instruction (e.g., Goodman, 1986), the basic trend--though not the term--became deeply rooted in Holdaway's (1979) "shared book experience," which is based firmly on Language Experience and Individualized Reading. In fact, so new is the term "Whole Language" that it was not even mentioned in any of a sample half dozen texts published in

the late 80s on kindergarten and/or emergent literacy (Fromberg, 1987; Schwartz, 1988; Shickendanz, 1986; Seefeldt, 1987; Spodek, 1986; Teale and Sulzby, 1986; Yaden and Templeton, 1986).

Even more disheartening was examination of curriculum guides in reading at the primary level from schools in forty states. The analysis was limited to guides published after the mid and late 1980s. They contained no mention of the term Whole Language, and in very few was there any evidence of the impact of such current thinking.

Like so many slogans, "Whole Language" is a dangerous term because its meaning varies with each educator. Most teachers, when asked for a definition, mention only the integration of writing with reading, while reading supervisors generally emphasize the child development aspect. Meanwhile, published explanations tend to incorporate almost everything that is "good" about reading instruction.

Although journal authors describe elements of Whole Language, not many have attempted a concise definition. One example, however, is that of Gunderson and Shapiro (1988): "'Whole Language' programs for teaching reading try to introduce children to literacy in the classroom in a holistic and natural manner. . . . Based on the premise that pedagogy should encourage the strategies observed in early readers . . . and imitate the conditions of early readers' learning environments." (p. 430)

To begin with, we might be well advised never to use the term Whole Language anyhow. As Routman (1988) pointed out: . . . "while many would say I am a whole language teacher, I am personally uncomfortable with the pureness that the term 'whole language' implies for me. . . . I am also concerned about the possible misuse of the term 'whole language' as a new catch phrase that opportunists will exploit to their advantage." (p. 26)

In other words, Whole Language is not a method of teaching, nor is it a

program; it is a philosophy or viewpoint. It can incorporate many different methods and materials, and has, in fact, adapted and moved beyond two of its precursors, Language Experience and Individualized Reading. Hence, as more a slogan than a method, it is subject to as many interpretations as there are proponents. The following are nine major characteristics of a Whole Language approach as culled from a variety of sources, with most agreed upon by a majority of authors.

1. Fun in Reading

Proponents of Whole Language believe children ought to have fun in reading. Even though motherhood and flag seem to be under attack these days, I hope we can still support this principle. Most of us would agree that it is a waste of time to teach children to read if, in the process, we don't help them want to read.

2. Oral Language as a Bridge to Print

Another basic principle, espoused by Language Experience of the 60s, is neither new nor unique to Whole Language. That is the use of children's known oral language to help them realize that print represents the same language they have been speaking and hearing for years. In other words, in the early stages of literacy, the task is to help youngsters to convert those squiggles on the page to the language they already know and understand.

On the other hand, most teachers recognize that print is more than "talk written down:" Printed language is a representation of the oral language; it is not language itself, despite a claim to the contrary by a few (e.g., Altwerger, et al., 1987). One result of differences between the oral and the written language is that we recognize the need to read to children so that they become familiar with the more complex patterns of formal literary English as well as with the informal oral.

3. Risk Taking

Important, but not always put into practice, is the belief that youngsters need to be risk takers in reading. Too often in classrooms children are expected to read with 100% accuracy. As a result, some plod along with a concern about every word in the text--a practice which, incidentally, no doubt contributes to the frequent mistaken notion of poor and beginning readers that "good reading" is strictly a matter of "knowing the words."

Poor readers also have a tendency to stop cold when they come to a word that is unfamiliar; good readers will continue on in the expectation of gaining additional context to help them figure out the difficult word. A part of this risk taking, however, must be the development of metacognition and its comprehension monitoring. That is, the reader needs to be aware of lapses in comprehension and needs to know what to do about such slippage.

Let's hope that all of us subscribe to and practice this tenet of Whole Language.

4. Use of Rich Literature

No teacher wants children to read contrived pap. But that kind of material was eroded considerably by proponents of Individualized Reading in the 60s and went the way of Dick and Jane two decades ago. Yes, good literature is essential and even basals have recognized this, in some cases right down to the first preprimer. Holdaway's influence can be recognized as teachers provide ". . .enrichment of a basic Language-experience methodology by the enjoyment of a rich literature." (Holdaway, 1979) We also find more and more big books and wordless picture books for the beginning reader.

As rightly pointed out by proponents of Whole Language, however, some teachers have kept children so locked in basals and in worksheets that the

poor kids have never had time to really read. Furthermore, while an anthology such as a basal may be a good vehicle for sampling literature and for introducing skills, children also need to get out of such collections and into real individual books--for the satisfaction of finishing a "book," if for no other reason.

This emphasis on literature is finally resulting in a return of the classroom library, an essential ingredient if we are to help youngsters become real readers. This aspect of reading instruction was lost in the 60s, when Title II created the impetus for centralized libraries at the elementary level, despite the evidence in favor of classroom libraries (Hillerich, 1966). How are children to read books unless those books are accessible at all times?

5. A Developmental vs. a Preconceived Sequence

The cry for adjusting programs to children instead of cramming children into preconceived cubby holes is not new. Whether labeled "adjusting to individual differences," "open education," or now "Whole Language," we need to recognize where each child is and proceed from there. Sound familiar?!

Unfortunately we have too often failed under the other slogans and in many instances I don't see us doing any better under the present one. For example, how can anyone proclaim to be an advocate of Whole Language with its developmental viewpoint and yet set up gatekeeping in the kindergarten. It happens in too many schools where educators think they are taking a developmental approach by instituting "pre first grades," "junior kindergartens," "transition rooms," or whatever other name is used as a smokescreen for retention. Some even use the Gesell tests for entrance--or more rightly termed, for exclusion--in kindergarten, despite the evidence that as many as 60% of identified "failures" are successful when allowed in school. (Graue and Shepard, 1989)

A developmental approach is one that recognizes "grade level" as nothing more than an age grouping. At beginning kindergarten the range of "achievement," based on oral language and reading, is at least six years. (Hillerich, 1978) It is unreasonable to expect that we can set up fences to accept only certain children; it is equally unrealistic to think that, given the range of abilities and experiences, we can make all children equal in achievement.

While accepting--and, I hope, putting into practice--the principles of individual differences, we have a right to question the Whole Language extremist's dichotomy: We don't need to make a choice between a developmental vs. a preconceived sequence of instruction. As pointed out by the ASCD Early Childhood Education Panel (1988), it is not a matter of either/or; there is a place for both. In a discussion of her observations in Australia, Routman stated: "I think what we do having the whole group work, the guided reading, and the individualized reading is an advantage, a better balance." (Goepfert, 1989, p. 43)

This position is recognized in the current New York City kindergarten guide (New York City Board of Education, 1987), which encourages direct instruction, multi-sensory experiences, and grouping, along with the less structured approach. Actually, some preplanned sequence--whether basal or locally developed--provides for continuity as opposed to chaos. The recognition of developmental status and rate of growth comes in the proper placing and pacing of children within the identified sequence.

6. Integrating the Language Arts

The long standing crusade by the National Council of Teachers of English to integrate writing has had an impact on "Whole Language" and on teachers in general. In fact, it is encouraging to see how writing has become such an important part of instruction, beginning in the

kindergarten. Not only has process writing been incorporated, but some of its philosophy has also been adapted to reading instruction, including the fact that language always occurs in a context, with that context crucial to meaning. Furthermore, youngsters are now learning to recognize the different purposes and audiences for writing.

This is as it should be. We know the many values of writing, extending from its reinforcement of the recognition vocabulary for beginning readers, to increased comprehension through clarification of thinking, and including the opportunity for purposeful reading of "publications" in the classroom. In terms of comprehension, it not only aids the writer in identifying what he or she understood from reading a selection (Langer, 1986), it is also helpful in retaining that information (Pressley, et al., 1989). Furthermore, such integration keeps the focus on communication so that youngsters identify intuitively the purpose for reading and for writing: The purpose is to communicate; it is not to process words nor is it to put correctly spelled words on paper with appropriate capitalization and punctuation. Yet, the latter misunderstandings are consistently found with poor readers and with many first graders.

While it is erroneous to go to the extreme, expecting instruction in specific reading skills to improve writing, or instruction in specific writing skills to improve reading (Stotsky, 1983), the evidence is that they are interactive (Shanahan, 1984): Experience with one reinforces the other. This is especially true of the fact that additional reading experience is as good as additional writing instruction for improving writing (Stotsky, 1983).

At the beginning level, we certainly ought to dismiss one extreme view offhand: the claim of Altwerger, and others (1987) that written language can precede oral development. (Of course, scribble can precede oral

language, and scribble is an indication of emergent literacy; however, it is no more "writing" than a baby's cooing is "speaking." Both are precursors of the use of language for communication.) In fact, do we even need to debate what I consider another false dichotomy: teaching writing before teaching reading (e.g., Clay, 1975). Here again, we have an interaction: Let's introduce them together and use their mutual reinforcement.

Since composing is one aspect of writing, oral composing is appropriate for children who cannot yet form letters. Also appropriate for such youngsters is the use of word stamps for those high frequency words, so that they can stamp words like The is on a . Then, by drawing pictures for nouns, they can "write" rebus sentences. Writing at later levels is also a good way to solidify an understanding of story grammar, the elements that make up a "story."

7. Reading Whole Texts vs. Excerpts

Where do you stand on this point? I wonder why we again have to set up a forced choice. Does it really have to be one or the other? While it is important for youngsters to read whole books that are appropriate to their level, there is also nothing wrong, at least in my opinion, with reading excerpts as well.

This is not to say we should tolerate adaptations that water down a text. In the process of adapting "classics," for example, we usually lose the literary qualities that make them classics. However, to excerpt an episode of good literature for an anthology is one way to provide a variety of samples for children to "taste." Furthermore, we know that any exposure to good children's literature--whether through a televised dramatization, the teacher's oral reading, or exposure to a chapter in an anthology--will result in a run on that title as each child wants to read

or re-read it.

8. Meaningful Use of Language vs. Isolated Drill

Let's hope we have no disagreements here! A valid criticism of our teaching of reading, for as long as I can recall, is that too often we might do a fantastic job of teaching a skill, but the poor child never finds out what that skill has to do with reading the book in hand. In fact, I found numerous youngsters in our reading clinic who knew more phonics than I'd ever care to learn, but they couldn't read! The need is for application. Not only must we teach some skills, we must also show youngsters how to apply them.

Furthermore, research evidence--from middle school (Garner and Kraus, (1982), through Fifth Grade (La Fontaine, 1984), to First Grade (Hillerich, in press)--reveals that too many students believe good reading is a matter of "knowing the words." Furthermore, the first graders believed the quality of writing was determined by spelling/punctuating correctly and by being quiet! Somehow youngsters are not getting the message about print that they already understand about oral language: like oral language, the purpose of print is also to communicate.

Here implications go from beginners to the most advanced students. At the early levels, we can use big books or transparencies of regular books to show application of skills. At the primary level, we can use the word introduction technique to review a decoding strategy before children read a selection. At any level, teacher modeling of a comprehension task will demonstrate its use; guided practice then leads children to application in a selection.

9. Reading is a Natural Act

Whole Language emphasis here is on incidental development of skill as opposed to direct instruction. Fields (1988), for example, claims that

writing and reading develop "naturally," like speaking and listening. Hence, many proponents of Whole Language claim that reading can be taught to children in school in the same manner as was typically used with the few who read before they entered school. This is called the "lap" method, since such preschool readers usually learned while on a lap or sitting with someone and being read to. Hence, the thought of some is that teachers can use big books and predictable books, reading aloud to children, encouraging them to chime in when they can, and through this experience they will learn to read better and more easily than they do in a basal or in any other direct teaching approach.

In fact, to support this position, some authors use analogies, such as the claim that individuals learn to play tennis by playing the game, not by merely practicing the skills. Yet, I believe you will find that they do both. And it is true that good musicians play music; they don't play notes. However, in order to play good music, they have spent many an hour with finger exercises.

More specifically, is much of the problem a result of different perspectives on placement? Is there a difference in treatment and resulting effectiveness, depending upon whether the teacher is dealing with a neophyte or one with some proficiency in reading? For example, Altwerger and others (1987) justify the Whole Language approach with the claim: "The key theoretical premise for Whole Language is that, the world over, babies acquire a language through actually using it, not through practicing its separate parts until some later date when the parts are assembled and the totality is finally used." (p. 145)

Such is definitely not the case at the beginning! Infants first practice babbling and cooing, move to language intonation patterns of all languages, then to a focus on the sounds of their native language as a

result of reinforcement , and finally to words. There is practice before application in meaning or use at this beginning level of oral development.

Conversely, however, we know in too many instances that practice in classrooms has nearly wiped out application in reading as teachers attempt to "complete" that basal with all of its skills. Is the solution to throw out the basal or to do some "housecleaning" by eliminating some of those elements in it that are called "skills" but which are at best unnecessary and at worst counterproductive?

Although extremists like to set up dichotomies--"formal" vs. "informal;" "skills" or "basal" vs. "whole language;" "academic focus" vs. "developmental focus"--I believe we need balance. Any type of organized program needs to be augmented with the good elements of Whole Language (or vice versa, if you prefer). Children need enjoyable exposure to good reading along with specific instruction and practice; their teachers need the time-saving support of a preplanned, organized basal or its equivalent.

Such a view seems to be held by the ASCD Early Childhood Education Policy Panel (1988), which suggested that both the academic and developmental focus can be successful by incorporating small group, total group, and individual activities; both teacher-directed and child-directed activities; time daily for skills groups based on abilities; and language development. They see the critical components as: gearing to the developmental level of children; ensuring success for children; integrating practice in specific reading skills with holistic comprehension; and establishing as goals in reading: independence, ability to understand and analyze stories, and a positive attitude.

While it is certainly true that some children will learn to read by the "lap method," any teacher who follows it with a class is going to find Dick and Jane lurking in the wings. Big books, read-alongs, predictable books,

all make a contribution, but again, must we make an either/or choice?

Where Are We?

Many school administrators and individual teachers have become excited about Whole Language. And it is certainly true that not all children have learned to read by traditional methods. However, I have never heard the claim by Shannon (1988) that ". . . both American and Canadian basals promise teachers, administrators, and state officials success in making every student literate with the ease of fingertip planning." (p. 630, my italics) Will all learn to read by any one method? As Pearson (ASCD, 1989) cautioned, some proponents of Whole Language ". . . go overboard with the notion that skills will take care of themselves. We don't need to get rid of these tools; we need to make them more helpful." (p. 6) There is much still to learn about "Whole Language." As recently as 1988, Eeds pointed out: "Whole language programs have not been tried in this country, and there are few studies that offer evidence of their effectiveness." (p. 49)

Yet, to research the effectiveness of Whole Language vs. a more structured approach--usually basals--is about like comparing apples and oranges. How does one research a philosophy, and especially one that is interpreted differently by different practitioners. Hence, while bits and pieces of method associated with the philosophy have been supported by research, such as reading to young children, using library reading, incorporating writing, and so on, little research has been done on the total.

Chall (1987) summarized her view of the evidence on early reading thus: "The research does not support the claims of some that skills and knowhow develop naturally from 'just reading.'" (p. 6) She stated further: "While some children may discover /how letters relate to the sounds of language/

by themselves, the research evidence over the past 70 years is overwhelming that direct instruction is needed and contributes to better development of decoding, word recognition, and comprehension, and provides a better transition to the later reading stages." (p. 8)

Adams (1988), in her summary of research on beginning reading, stated: ". . . approaches in which systematic code instruction is included alongside meaning emphasis, language instruction, and connected reading are found to result in superior reading achievement overall." (Sec.II, Ch.1, pp. 20-21)

Looking at higher levels, Pressley, and others (1989) make it clear in their summary of research on comprehension development that students don't discover on their own the important enhancers of comprehension, such as summarizing, question generation, imaging, and so on. They state: "In summary, teaching is explicit, intensive, and extensive." (p. 26)

The one summary of research more specific to Whole Language, however, seems to clarify some of the confusion. Stahl and Miller (1989) re-analyzed the National First Grade Studies dealing with language experience and then included a meta-analysis of 42 other studies that met their criteria of Whole Language: stressed children's oral language as a bridge to print, avoided preconceived skill sequences, used literature instead of basals, and emphasized meaningful use of language vs. isolated parts. These researchers reported that overall there was no significant difference in effectiveness between basals and Whole Language. However, broken down by level, they found a slight advantage for Whole Language at the readiness level (oral) and a slight advantage for basals at levels beyond that. In other words, in keeping with common sense, the less structured approach is appropriate in acquainting youngsters with the purposes for print, but more structure is helpful if they are to learn the

skills necessary to become independent readers.

In fact, these authors pointed out that overemphasis on the oral detracts because it minimizes exposure to print. Going beyond this point, Big Books seem to provide a better vehicle than the dictated language experience story because young children's dictated sentences are not even as sophisticated as their normal speaking patterns, much less of the complexity of book language.

Of course, like so many comparative studies, the research of Stahl and Miller is already outdated because the type of basal they compared with Whole Language is no longer common, especially at early levels. As the authors recognize, the impact of current trends has affected basals which have incorporated many of the good elements of Whole Language. And isn't this as it should be?

At present we are obviously in a state of flux: Some educators want to eliminate sequential skill development while others cry out for more phonics workbooks; some recognize the need to adjust curriculum to the developmental level of children while others--sometimes the same people--create additional pigeonholes "transition rooms" in which to place youngsters who fail to come up to certain preconceived standards (Pipho, 1988). We must make every effort to ensure that the good elements--actually not innovations of Whole Language at all--are here to stay, especially the encouragement to modify curriculum to fit kids instead of trying to fit kids to our preconceived molds, the emphasis on children doing a lot more real reading and meaningful writing, and doing both as communicative acts rather than devoting the majority of time to skill exercises. In terms of materials, this clearly means having more trade books and having them accessible in the classroom as well as in the library.

On our present return swing with Whole Language let's stop the pendulum in the middle ground, recognizing that if children are to become independent readers they need both: They need to learn some skills and they need to use those skills in real reading. Nor is it news to many teachers to hear again that fifty percent of the time called "reading" needs to be devoted to the enjoyable application and practice of skills in library books. Let's recognize that both skill and interest are essential--that skill without interest is futile, but interest without skill is frustrating.

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